Catholic Social Teaching in Practice

Although the virtues are implicit in Catholic Social Teaching, they are too often overlooked. In this pioneering study, Andrew M. Yuengert draws on the neo-Aristotelian virtues tradition to bring the virtue of practical wisdom into an explicit and wide-ranging engagement with the Church’s social doctrine. Practical wisdom and the virtues clarify the meaning of Christian personalism, highlight the irreplaceable role of the laity in social reform, and bring attention to the important task of lay formation in virtue. This form of wisdom also offers new insights into the Church’s dialogue with economics and the social sciences and reframes practical political disagreements between popes, bishops, and the laity in a way that challenges both laypersons and episcopal leadership. Yuengert’s study respects the Church’s social tradition, while showing how it might develop to be more practical. By proposing active engagement with practical wisdom, he demonstrates how Catholic Social Teaching can more effectively inform and inspire practical social reform.

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Catholic Social Teaching in Practice
Exploring Practical Wisdom and the Virtues Tradition

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Preface

In this book, I attempt to bring the neo-Aristotelian virtues tradition into a closer conversation with the principle-driven analysis of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). I do not aim to replace CST’s hard-won principles with the virtues. Virtues and principle-driven analysis cannot replace each other, but they should complement and inform each other. The virtues tradition reflects on human happiness and concrete human action. The tradition of CST provides a moral framework for reflection on the nature of a good society, in order to inform and motivate those who act to reform it. I hope to show how a closer engagement with the virtues tradition sheds new light on CST’s principles, on the conversation between the Church and its dialog partners in social science and public policy, and on the Church’s own internal practical disagreements. This engagement should make CST able to contribute more effectively to practical action, which is its professed purpose.

The intellectual challenge of bringing the virtues into closer conversation with the moral analysis of CST is but one example of the modern challenge of bringing analysis into conversation with practice. One of the great unexplored lessons of our age is that meticulous empirical, theoretical, and moral analysis can never add up to an actual concrete decision in political or private life. All of these forms of analysis are highly relevant to policy decisions, of course. Through empirical analysis, we seek knowledge of past relationships between proposed changes in policy and measurable outcomes. These empirical relationships do not interpret themselves; we also need precise theoretical analysis to give empirical relationships meaning. We rely on carefully specified ethical principles from moral analysis (for example, rights, duties, benevolence, or the calculus of consequences) to evaluate trade-offs between competing goods.
Faced with difficult decisions, few would eschew the insights of careful analysis. Nevertheless, the old adage about economists—that if you lay every economist end to end, they will never reach a conclusion—is true of modern analysis in all its forms. If you lay all of the technical studies of statisticians, theorists, and ethicists end to end, they will never reach a practical conclusion. Analysis breaks a problem into pieces, to better study relationships between parts; in contrast, a practical decision is synthetic—good as a whole, not just in its parts. Analysis traces relationships among precise-but-imperfect measurements and among abstract concepts and principles; in contrast, any decision about what to do must gauge the distance between measurement, concept, principle, and concrete reality.

This lesson is unexplored because we are uncertain how to apply it to our inquiries and deliberations. We know, of course, that there is a gap between the multitude of our technical investigations and actual decision-making. We know that something must fill the space between careful analyses of decisions and the actual decisions themselves. That something is a mystery to analytical method, however; there are no analytically precise practical guides sufficient to make a decision. Because we cannot model the gap between partial analysis and practical synthesis with analytical precision, we say little about synthesis. Somehow, decision-makers must put everything together and then act. They must combine insights from many different partial analytical perspectives and judgments about what is concretely possible and take responsibility for a starkly unconditional and final decision: take this particular action, period.

Faced with the necessity of bringing analysis to the point of action, but without a clear analytical account of how to decide in a particular circumstance, we respond in one of two ways. First, many choose one of the many partial analytical perspectives and treat it as a sufficient basis for practical deliberations. We cannot do without a comprehensive perspective, so we promote something partial and
1 In the recent pandemic, many public health professionals adopted reductions in Covid infection and death rates as sufficient guides for policy. For their part, many economists assumed that economic growth was paramount – that a reduction in infection rates was desirable primarily because it would spur an economic recovery more quickly. Advocates for civil liberties interpreted mask mandates and shutdowns through the lens of endangered freedoms of assembly, religion, and exchange. Few analysts attempted to find a perspective from which to reconcile the unavoidable trade-offs between public health, economic activity, and civil liberties; no such analytical framework exists.

A second response to the practical insufficiency of analysis is to undertake more analysis. We are good at producing technical studies – of pursuing creative new empirical, theoretical, and moral approaches – and so we pile up more analysis, hoping that the sheer weight of partial perspectives will somehow make the practical decision obvious. At least, we assume that more technical reports and investigations cannot hurt.

Instead of accumulating analyses endlessly, or pretending that partial perspectives (however rigorous and exact) can substitute for the synthetic deliberations that precede action, we might instead allocate some of our scarce attention away from analysis and toward the mystery of concrete decision-making. The neo-Aristotelian tradition of practical wisdom and the virtues offers an account of this mystery. It begins with a non-technical, non-analytic description of human deliberation and action. It does not provide a detailed template for decision-making in every situation. Instead, it combines a sketch of chaotic decision-making environments, a schematic exploration of the human goods and purposes that orient practical deliberation,
a description of the social context that develops and supports good decision-makers, and an account of what it means to excel at making particular, concrete decisions (the virtues).

The neo-Aristotelian virtues tradition does not satisfy the analytical demand for third-person objectivity and rigor. This should surprise no one: After all, there is an unbridgeable gap between rigorous technical analysis and actual decision-making. Any description of what fills that gap, therefore, cannot be purely analytical.

Fortunately, the human mind is capable of placing side-by-side these seemingly incongruent modes of reason: the many technical analyses that are crucial to but insufficient for good decision-making, and the non-technical (but nonetheless meticulous) description of decision-making itself. I am convinced that the multitude of expert analyses on any topic will become more practical when we spend time reflecting on what it is like to make an actual decision. Even though analysis cannot itself bridge the gap between technical rigor and action, an awareness of the landscape of action and analysis can make analysis wiser, more aware of its limits and of its genuine contributions to those who must deliberate and act in the world. I make this argument in two previous books on practical wisdom and economics.\(^2\)

My interest in CST and economics complements my interest in economics and the virtues tradition.\(^3\) In this book, I turn my attention to the Church’s social tradition and its relationship to the virtues and social science. CST is a body of papal writings and Vatican Council II documents that together offer a vision of a flourishing society and criteria for applying that vision to the social order. I argue that CST will become more practical – make a more effective contribution to


its project of social reform – to the extent that it reflects on the neo-Aristotelian account of practical wisdom and the virtues.

CST bears the marks of many different moral theologies and philosophies; unsurprisingly, it also bears the marks of modern moral analysis. It is a set of “principles for reflection” and “criteria for judgment” developed through ongoing reflection on the Gospel, and on evolving social conditions since the industrial revolution. A partial list of these principles includes human dignity, the social nature of human beings, subsidiarity and solidarity, just wages, environmental stewardship, and a wide array of human rights. Nonetheless, CST fits imperfectly into the analytical-practical challenge outlined above. First, its purpose is unapologetically practical: to reform the social order in light of the Gospel. The popes aim to inspire and guide lay Catholics (and non-Catholics attracted by its moral framework) to act to reform society from within. Second, CST does not ignore practical wisdom and the virtues. Catholic moral theology has strong links to the virtues tradition. Even though CST (whose focus is social ethics, not moral theology) does not itself offer a full account of the virtues, it refers to them and gestures toward the fuller accounts of virtue in Catholic moral theology.

Hence, CST is not purely analytical: Officially, it both aims at practical action and acknowledges the virtues. Nonetheless, I will argue that the virtues are too implicit in CST. The social encyclicals focus on principles and social analysis; practical wisdom and the virtues are offstage and easily overlooked. Moreover, many (if not most) of those who read and interpret the tradition are skeptical of the neo-Aristotelian virtues tradition. They are thus disinclined to explore the role of practical wisdom and the virtues in human action and instead focus on the development of the principles without reference to virtue. In addition, CST is in close dialog with theoretical and applied social science – disciplines that are relentlessly analytical.

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Over time, this dialog can lead both non-virtue theorists and virtue theorists to de-emphasize the virtues, in a search for common ground. Consequently, those who study and apply the social doctrine are more likely to overlook (or intentionally ignore) practical wisdom and the virtues and are uninterested in how the challenges of practical application might affect the principles.

CST has ties to the virtue tradition, and its practical goal of social reform in light of the Gospel prevents it from ignoring practical matters entirely. In CST, practical wisdom and the virtues are waiting in the wings – easily ignored or overlooked, but still near at hand. This makes it an ideal example of what analysis might gain when it pays closer attention to virtue.
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Abbreviations

Catholic Reference Resources

*Catechism* United States Catholic Conference, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
*CST* Catholic Social Teaching
*Compendium* Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*

Works of Aquinas

*DR* *De Regno ad Regem Cypri*
*DV* *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*
*SCG* *Summa Contra Gentiles*
*ST* *Summa Theologica*

Works of Aristotle

*NE* *Nicomachean Ethics*
*Pol* *Politics*
*Rhetoric*